

Wildlife at risk from dwindling rivers, says WWF

Ben Webster, Environment Editor

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The River Itchen in Hampshire is being harmed by over-abstraction by Southern Water, the charity says

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Kingfishers, water vole, trout and other wildlife populations are under threat because water companies and farmers are draining dozens of rivers.

Too much is being taken from 550 bodies of water in England and Wales, an analysis shows, including some of the finest chalk streams where flow has been reduced to a trickle.

The problem has become acute because Britain has experienced its driest winter and early spring for more than 20 years, the WWF says. The charity accuses water companies of seeking cheap sources of clean water, extracting it from rivers rather than investing in

treatment systems and fixing leaks.

Environment Agency figures reveal that 42 per cent of England's chalk streams are below their environmental limit, meaning wildlife is threatened.



Kingfishers are among a number of species being threatened by the draining of more than 500 bodies of water in England and Wales

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Chalk streams have naturally filtered water from springs and are havens for kingfishers, otters, and rare species such as the southern damselfly.

The Itchen in Hampshire is being harmed by over-abstraction by Southern Water, the WWF said. Bevern stream, a tributary of the Ouse in Sussex, was deep enough to swim in 20 years ago but can now be walked across all year round.

Peter King, project officer for the Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust, said abstraction by farmers and landowners had increased in the past five years. "Those who visit for canoeing, wildlife and fishing are not visiting anymore. Angling clubs have seen a 50 per cent decline in memberships. We have also seen a strong decrease in pike and carp."

Water voles are particularly threatened by low rivers because they are more vulnerable to predators. Their numbers have declined by 90 per cent since the 1970s.

Most abstraction rights date back to the 1963 Water Act, which gave no regard to the environment. A white paper in 2011, Water for Life, promised new legislation for England and Wales. However, in April the government said there would be an indefinite delay in introducing a water bill, citing time limitations owing to Brexit.

Four out of five people believe wildlife has as much right to water as people, according to a survey commissioned by the WWF. More than two thirds said the government should restrict the water taken from rivers.

The WWF said Ofwat should require water companies to develop “smarter tariffs”, charging households more during droughts to encourage water saving. However, only half of homes have water meters and most of those cannot handle variable charging.

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